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ABSTRACT

In a freshman English class that aims at improving the students' general writing ability, reading activities and materials should be used only to the extent that they directly contribute to writing development. The following criteria can be used to select and evaluate reading materials for a writing class: (1) stimulating quality; (2) relevance; (3) length; and (4) comprehensibility. The final criterion should be the specific interests, needs, attitudes, and motivations of the students themselves. (RS)

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ED311396

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Selecting Reading Materials for a Writing Class

In this paper I present some criteria that I have found useful in selecting reading materials for a freshman English writing class at college level. My basic assumption here is that reading materials do have a place in a writing class as long as they contribute directly to the development of writing ability in a short time.

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BACKGROUND

The use of reading materials in a writing class is a controversial issue these days. This was born out for me by the results of a survey I conducted in the spring of 1987 at the English Department of Indiana University Pennsylvania on freshman English instructors' views about the place of reading in a writing class.[1] Most of the instructors believed that reading should play an important role in a writing class, yet there was little consensus on what that role should be or how reading materials are to be used. The great majority thought that their freshman students had problems in reading. Most believed reading problems should be dealt with in freshman English through assignment of reading materials while some believed that, in a writing class, students should spend time writing, revising, and giving feedback to one another. Because there are such vast differences of opinion among teachers on what role reading should play in a writing class, I will spend some time on the importance of setting realistic goals before I discuss my criteria for selecting reading materials.

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SETTING GOALS

When choosing reading materials for our writing classes, we tend to look back at our own college years and recall the kinds of things we had read as part of our freshman English Experience. We recall that the materials we read played a part in our intellectual development, and some of us might say that they helped improve our writing. We may then ask ourselves if we should use, in our freshman English classes now, the same materials that we read in our own freshman English classes. I believe that the answer should depend on the types of students we have. Many applied linguists today hold that the best instructional design is one that takes the attitudes, motivations, and needs of our students into account. Since today's students are different, then a different approach is needed.

Some writing teachers are concerned that the reading ability of many of today's college students is not what it should be. If this is the case, our colleges must test the incoming students for reading ability and set up special programs to help the less proficient readers as some colleges already have done. But why not try to take care of the reading problems in the writing class? My answer is that there just isn't enough time. First of all, it is doubtful that we can turn nonproficient readers into proficient ones in a class that meets only a few hours a week over one semester. Moreover, the more time we spend on reading, the less time we will have available to spend on writing development. This is not to say that we can't help our students develop some good reading strategies by showing them how to attend to discourse structure. However, we do need to decide what our high priorities are for our writing class and

concentrate on those.

Another point that some instructors raise is that reading and writing are closely interrelated and that, if we get our students to read a lot, this will improve their writing. Although this argument is intuitively appealing, the research on the effects of reading on writing does not provide conclusive evidence in its support. The research studies in this area can be divided into two categories: those that examine the effects of previous reading experience on writing ability and those that examine the effects of reading as a concurrent treatment for improvement of writing.

A study conducted by Krashen and his colleagues (1984, p.4) and many studies reviewed by Stotsky (1983, p.629) indicate that students who have done a great deal of voluntary reading in the years preceding college tend to write better when they enter college. Studies that have examined the relationship between reading ability and writing ability have also found some significant positive correlation between the two (Stotsky, 1983, p. 628-29). However, it should be noted that such correlational studies do not account for the individual variations of many students who read well but do not write well and visa versa.[2] Moreover, simply because there is a significant correlation between previous reading habits and writing quality, we cannot conclude that there is a causal relationship; a different factor may have brought about improvement in both. Even if we assume that, in the above studies, reading has significantly contributed to good writing ability, we should remember that such an effect has been achieved over a long period of time and that these studies say nothing about what effects the short-term inclusion of reading activities in a writing class might have on writing

ability. For information in this area, we need to look at our second category of research studies.

Stotsky (1983, p.635) reviews six studies that were designed to investigate the effect of reading instruction in a writing class on writing skills. Not one of these studies shows any significantly superior results in the writing of the experimental group (i.e., the group receiving reading instruction) over the control group. In fact, in two of the studies, the control group did better in measures of writing quality. This is not surprising as the control groups probably had more time to benefit from writing instruction and writing experience.

In sum, the above evidence suggests that the inclusion of reading instruction in a college writing class in hopes of improving writing ability is not likely to bear much fruit. Also, we should be reminded that whenever we take time to spend on reading assignments in the classroom, we may be taking valuable time away from the acquisition of writing skills.

Another common approach to the use of reading materials is their use as models of rhetorical modes such as description, narration, comparison and contrast, and argumentation. There are, indeed, many freshman composition texts that cater to this proclivity. This approach assumes that once the students examine a few samples of a rhetorical mode, they should be able to produce it in their own writing. In my own experience, this works well with advanced writers who like to experiment with different ways of essay development, but it becomes a straightjacket on the less advanced writers' creativity as they not only have to generate ideas for writing but they are also

required to cast them into a predetermined mold. This is not to say that we should not get the students to attend to the rhetorical structure of what they read, but that we should not let the rhetorical patterning alone become the deciding factor in choosing reading materials.

It seems to me, then, in a freshman English class that aims at improving the students' general writing ability, reading activities and materials should be used to the extent that they directly contribute to writing development. With this in mind, we can now look at some criteria that can help us in selecting reading materials.

SELECTING READING MATERIALS

In this section, I present some criteria that have helped me in selecting and evaluating reading materials for a writing class.

Criterion 1: Stimulating Quality. Ideally, the reading materials we choose for a writing class must be mentally stimulating for the students so that they can generate ideas for writing. However, one should be careful not to take this criterion to an extreme. Some instructors bemoan the fact that many students are not as intellectually developed as they would like them to be, and they may feel that they can use freshman English to increase the intellectual development of their students by having them read such things as Greek and Shakespearean tragedies and the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Some teachers may go as far as turning the class into a forum in which to read and talk about what they themselves strongly believe in, such as freedom, democracy, the plight of the working man, or women's issues. No one would object to contributing to

the students' intellectual development and we should consider ourselves to have failed if we conclude we have not done this.[3] Nonetheless, I believe we should not feel responsible to make the students accomplish what they should have achieved in years of previous schooling or what they should attain from their other classes at college. Having mentioned this caveat, I would repeat that the reading materials we choose should engage the students mentally so that they may help the students to generate more ideas for writing.

Criterion 2: Relevance. If the reading materials are to appeal to our students, they ought to be relevant to their interests. One relevant source might be the school paper. Another source might be Time or Newsweek or even Psychology Today. Yet another source for some classes might be series of books, sources, and pamphlets published by Greenhaven Press on such topics as AIDS, male/female roles, abortion, sexual values, or censorship. Some textbooks, such as Robert K. Miller's Informed Argument, also have collections of articles on topics such as gun control, capital punishment, censorship, nuclear power, and higher education, which may appeal to many college students. In any case, it is our specific students' interests that become a deciding factor in our choice of materials.

Criterion 3: Length. Shorter reading passages seem to lend themselves better to freshman English writing classes as students can finish reading them in one sitting and be ready to respond to the whole text. Essays may be the most appropriate since they are short and are the same genre as what the students are normally asked to produce.

Criterion 4: Comprehensibility. The reading materials we choose should be comprehensible to our students. This means that the language and the concepts in the texts are at a level that is not far beyond the students' linguistic and conceptual level.[4] This is not to say that we should give them oversimplified materials but only that, if the materials are too difficult for students to process, they may get discouraged and lose interest. We all have some intuition about what our students can handle. However, if we want to make a more objective assessment of whether a text is comprehensible to our students, we can turn a portion of it into a cloze passage where we delete, say, every sixth or seventh word and have the students supply the missing words. If, for example, they get over 70 per cent of the words right, we might conclude that the text is comprehensible to them.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, I have discussed the necessity of setting realistic goals for using reading materials in a writing class and have presented some criteria that should help in selecting materials that are likely to appeal to our students and to generate ideas for writing. I will conclude by saying that the final criterion should be our specific students themselves; their specific interests, needs, attitudes, motivations, and goals should be the most important deciding factor in the choice of reading materials and activities for the writing class.

Notes

[1]. Twenty-nine instructors participated in this scurvy. Almost all had taught English I recently. Currently, at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, there are three required General Education English courses: English I is mainly concerned with expository writing skills; English II is concerned mainly with documented, researched writing; and English III is an introduction to literature course.

[2]. In Iran and the Arab countries a high percentage of the people can read but cannot write at all.

[3]. In fact, I feel that even if we do no reading in our writing classes but get the students to write a lot, instead, we would still contribute to their intellectual development since I believe, as do many others, that writing is a process of self-discovery; that is, as the students write, they discover new things about themselves and the world around them and invent ideas that they never thought they were capable of before.

[4]. Krashen (e.g. 1984) has advanced the notion of comprehensibility as the condition for second language acquisition. Here, I am interested in the notion of comprehensibility not as a condition for linguistic development but rather as a condition for maintaining student interest and attention.

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